2020 Award Winners

Undergraduate Awards

Imogene Jacobs Award

Rebekah Benjamin-Pollak was nominated for this award with a great deal of faculty support: Akira Miyake, Eric Pederson, Eliana Colunga and Naomi Friedman all wrote on her behalf. Rebekah’s accomplishments range from being an excellent and thoughtful student, a promising, dedicated and meticulous researcher and an organized, proactive scientist, whose commitment to her work is unparalleled. In fact, Dr. Miyake notes that she may be the strongest student he has ever had in his lab in the past 25 years. She is also admirably collaborative and possesses great leadership skills, which are also noted in her nomination letters. Congratulations, Bekah!

The Imogene Jacobs Psychology Thesis Award

Montana Ploe

Thesis Title: Another Side of Psychopathy: Associations with Reward Dysregulation and Social Connection in Emerging Adults

Advisor: Dr. June Gruber

Montana conducted an impressive and independent senior thesis under Dr. Gruber’s supervision. Her thesis project addressed a growing and timely issue concerning the epidemic and “crisis” of mental health challenges currently facing college students. She was awarded a competitive individual student research fellowship from the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) to support her research. Her written thesis and oral defense were intellectually rigorous and articulate, and she is currently preparing her work for publication. Congratulations, Montana!
The Neuroscience Thesis Award

Ryan Sullivan
Thesis Title: *Spontaneous Backstory Creation*
Advisor: Dr. Matt Jones
Ryan showed remarkable originality and independence in his work, that investigated how people spontaneously synthesize background stories for strangers they encounter, to explain and predict their behavior. Ryan developed a clever and novel experimental task to test his hypothesis, using interdisciplinary methods to answer his question. In his thesis and defense, Ryan showed great intellectual maturity and depth of thought about his research and its implications. Congratulations, Ryan!

The Psychology/Neuroscience Leadership Award

Elizabeth Hoelscher possesses many skills and talents, as she is a superior student, research assistant and thesis student, notes June Gruber, and you might remember Lizzie as a winner of the Drutz award last year. This year, the Leadership Award focuses on her additional talents and hard work as President of Psi Chi, where, according to Jenn Stratford, she has further established herself as a strong leader, with a clear vision for the organization. Her organized, thorough manner of working with other students and advisors has helped to ensure that the goals are on track. She has also served as an effective, clear and engaging Learning Assistant and has contributed to important outreach events in the Boulder community as well. Congratulations, Lizzie!

The David E. Drutz Scholarship

Rafael Orozco Leon is a first-generation college student and a research assistant with the Intermountain Neuroimaging Consortium. Rafael has devoted a good deal of his time to service both in and outside the department, for example as a Psi Chi officer and a peer mentor with underrepresented students, and counselor for kids whose parents are affected by cancer, among other endeavors. Nicole Speer also wrote on his behalf, noting that Rafael is already a very capable young scientist who is making significant contributions to the success of brain imaging research at CU. Dr Speer notes that Rafael’s work to date with INC will be invaluable in their ability to save longitudinal data from studies that were interrupted because of COVID-19, and will contribute to the success of at least a dozen at-risk research studies. Congratulations, Rafael!
The David E. Drutz Scholarship

Julia Schmidt was selected on the basis of her reliability and conscientiousness as a student, and her ability to persevere in the face of adversity, working hard to understand and excel with challenging material. Heidi Day’s letter of support for Julia also notes that Julia has excellent scientific writing skills, and clearly understands difficult concepts, like the strengths and limitations of experimental designs and execution in neuroscience studies. Congratulations, Julia!

Christina Fang is majoring in Psychology and Sociology with a minor in Chinese as well as a certificate in Public Health and is already the recipient of several scholarships and awards. As if that weren’t enough, Christina is in the top 5% of students she has taught, in terms of intelligence, dedication, attention to detail and overall ability. In addition, Christina is an essential member of the Psi Chi officer team, and is a mature, strong leader, and has a clear ability to follow through on important tasks in an important, dedicated manner. Congratulations, Christina!

Kiara Rodriguez is a sophomore student in our department, and a first-generation college student. Nicole Speer, who supervises Kiara’s internship with the Intermountain Neuroimaging Consortium at CU Boulder, describes her as a “rising star.” She notes that Kiara was one of the first class of research interns hired by the INC, and has been appreciated during her internship for her communication, problem-solving and teamwork skills, as well as her capacity for leadership. Nicole also points out that Kiara has proven herself to be exceptionally responsible, motivated, creative and capable of any task she takes on. In fact, the document that Kiara started independently will now serve as the basis for a training document for the INC community. Her deep interest in Psychology and Neuroscience makes her an “incredibly fast learner”, with much to offer. Congratulations, Kiara!
The Bourne/Yaroush Award

**Rafael Orozco Leon** was also successfully nominated for this new award for undergraduate students interested in cognitive psychology. Rafael’s research focus on cognitive functioning (particularly spatial awareness, short-term memory and sight awareness), along with his established track record as a superb research assistant for the INC, contributed to him being regarded by the Awards Committee as an ideal candidate for this award as well. He will be writing his Honors Thesis next year in the area of Cognitive Psychology. Congratulations, Rafael!

**Rebekah Benjamin-Pollak** was nominated for this award with a great deal of faculty support: Akira Miyake, Eliana Colunga and Naomi Friedman all wrote on her behalf. Rebekah is particularly interested in cognitive processes related to learning, including note-taking, mind wandering and individual differences therein. She hopes to eventually apply her interest and experience in Cognitive Psychology to the field of education. Rebekah’s accomplishments range from being an excellent and thoughtful student, a promising, dedicated and meticulous researcher and an organized, proactive scientist, whose commitment to her work is unparalleled. She is also admirably collaborative and possesses great leadership skills, which are also noted in her nomination letters. You’ll notice that Bekah is also the recipient of this year’s Imogene Jacobs Award. Congratulations, Bekah!
Graduate Awards

Dosier/Muenzinger Award for Outstanding Contribution to Basic Research

Richard Border, one of our Winter 2019 graduates, was nominated by his mentors Soo Rhee and Matt Keller for this award. They note that Richard is one of the “brightest, most conscientious, most generous and hardest working graduate students we have ever encountered in our combined ~35 years at the University of Colorado.” He has been an extraordinarily productive researcher, with an impressive publication record in high-impact journals. One of his articles showed that over 1000 previous “candidate gene” studies on major depression were wrong. This paper has already garnered numerous citations, and was also the subject of a popular press article in The Atlantic. His research record is one that an early career faculty member should be proud of, much less a graduate student. In addition, Richard obtained a Master’s degree in Applied Math while obtaining his PhD in our department, has been awarded NIMH training grants every year he was eligible, and has received prestigious post-doc offers. Congratulations, Richard!

Dosier/Muenzinger Award for Outstanding Contribution to Translational Research

Sarah Hagerty was nominated by Kent Hutchison, who notes that Sarah is one of the top trainees Kent has had in his 20 years of mentoring. Sarah’s areas of interest have included the quantification of methylation of DNA useful in predicting neurocognitive function and how epigenetics may impact learning and memory across the lifespan. In addition, Sarah has investigated how changes in mindfulness practice are associated with changes in inflammation and gut microbiome, and how that relates to changes in alcohol use. Kent notes that Sarah’s versatility, intellectual curiosity and ambition, as well as her research and analysis skills, have made her a very successful researcher, with an impressive publication record and great potential for broad scientific impact in the course of her career. Congratulations, Sarah!
Dosier/Muenzinger Award for Outstanding Teaching

Helen Strnad was enthusiastically nominated by Heidi Day. Helen has TA’d for Heidi for 4 semesters in her “Lab Techniques in Neuroscience” course, and Heidi notes her confidence, maturity and initiative in this difficult TA assignment. Heidi notes that “the most obvious quality Helen exhibits is her tremendous energy and enthusiasm for both neuroscience and teaching…. Helen has a perfect blend of approachability for students, paired with a commanding presence in the classroom.” She also notes that “It is one thing to have energy and enthusiasm yourself, but another to inspire it in other people.” Helen successfully engages her students not only in topics related to the specifics of the class, but engages and encourages them to extend their thinking beyond the classroom. Helen’s desire to be an effective teacher has led her to improve her teaching through participation in FTEP programs, and she has worked on designing and writing a textbook/course guide for the course. The Awards committee agreed with Dr. Day that Helen Strnad is an exceptional nominee for this award. Congratulations, Helen!

Sean Hudson Leadership Award

Christopher Mellinger was nominated by 10(!!!) of his fellow graduate students, who cited Christopher’s unique selflessness, willingness to help others, and role as an important leader in maintaining an inclusive culture among the grad students in our department. He has led the CU Social Psychology Club for several years, an organization which organizes travel funds for students. He organizes social events and leads recreational sports teams. As a statistical expert in the department, he is consistently willing to offer extensive and detailed support to his fellow students as they struggle with the quantitative aspects of their work. The way in which he provides such leadership and collegiality is also remarkably generous and kind, and his fellow students laud him for the empathy and care he shows to other students, an example which also serves as an important model of leadership in the department. Christopher, we are delighted to hear of your great contributions to the department. Congratulations!

Peter G. Ossorio Award

Julia Salinger was nominated by the Clinical area, and her mentor Mark Whisman. Julia has established herself as an active and productive researcher on the interface between interpersonal functioning, including functioning in intimate relationships such as marriage, and mental and physical health. She has co-authored papers on relationship quality and mortality, published in top-notch journals and covered in the popular press. She has several papers under editorial review, including a first-authored paper on relationship quality and psychopathology in a multi-national sample of over 4,700 married couples from 11 countries in Europe. She is also the Intake Coordinator in the Raimy Psychology Clinic, where she has been assisting graduate students in the clinical psychology program switch to telemedicine in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Congratulations, Julia!